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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000189

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DEPARTMENT FOR INR/R/MR, EUR/SE, EUR/PD, NEA/PD, DRL  
JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OPRC KMDR TU

SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2008

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#### In Today's Papers

##### Building Blast Kills 22 in Istanbul

All papers report more than 20 people were killed when an explosion ripped through a building housing an unlicensed fireworks factory in Istanbul. Fourteen of the deaths occurred when the victims gathered to watch the fire triggered by a boiler explosion. The five-storey plant was located in the Davutpasa neighborhood of Istanbul.

Although municipality officials discovered the unlicensed factory last week, they did not shut the plant down. Instead, they asked the owner to obtain a license. Papers ask how the factory managed to transport such a sizable amount of explosives without obtaining the required permission from the police. Many plants in the area skip the weekly boiler inspections in order to reduce maintenance costs. Papers criticize authorities for making 'scandalous' remarks, such as Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler's complaints that unlicensed plants continue to operate, and Mayor Kadir Topbas' charge that citizens decline to file complaints.

##### Editorial Commentary on Fireworks Plant Blast-Caused Deaths

Umur Talu wrote in mainstream Sabah (2/1): "Turkey is witnessing the heartbreaking results of a regime that turns a blind eye to slavery. One day we hear reports from the east of children who are forced into temporary agricultural work and, as a result, who die in traffic accidents while they commute to these jobs. The next day, we hear news of female workers being burned to death while they work in illegal businesses in Istanbul. While everyone rightly screams with each martyr's death, why are officials not taking precautions to prevent forced labor? These slaves are uninsured, overworked, poorly paid, intimidated, injured, and sometimes even blown into pieces. Which NGO, reporter or politician is drawing attention to this issue? I don't know who will care, but those people who were burned alive, blown into pieces or crushed under debris yesterday in Istanbul were the children of this country. They lost their lives because of sheer negligence."

**University Rectors Oppose Freeing Turban Ban in Universities**  
All papers report university rectors have mobilized to oppose the ruling AKP and opposition MHP plans to ease the ban on the Muslim headscarf for female students. The rectors argue the reform runs contrary to the principles of the secular republic. Istanbul University Rector Professor Mesut Parlak told academics yesterday that the headscarf adjustments posed a significant threat to the public. In addition, Parlak complained that the universities were not asked for their views regarding the matter. Mainstream Hurriyet reports some of the academics expressed concern that the headscarf regulation is a first step in Turkey's transformation into an Islamic state. Papers report that the student senates of several other universities across Turkey issued statements to condemn the headscarf adjustments. The Aegean University Senate released a statement saying that the headscarf "was not a symbol of freedom, but rather an obstacle to freedom." On Friday, the inter-university board of rectors will hold a meeting to discuss the AKP-MHP turban plans. Papers report academics from universities in Ankara told CHP lawmakers Kemal Anadol and Hakki Suha Okay that the headscarf reforms submitted to the parliament's approval were designed to undermine Turkey's secular system.

Meanwhile, CHP leader Deniz Baykal told a private television channel the headscarf has emerged as "a new definition of Islam." Responding to a question about whether the military was a mechanism for protecting the republic, Baykal said he saw the Turkish people as the only guardians of Turkey.

**Erdogan on the Turban Controversy, Terror and Turkey-Greece Ties**  
All papers report Prime Minister Erdogan said Thursday evening in his televised monthly address that lifting the headscarf ban was a matter of individual freedom. "It is possible to resolve these problems with common sense, by ensuring the widest possible social compromise. No state can advance if it sees its citizens as a

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"threat," said Erdogan. Erdogan also referred to a major police operation against the illegal 'Ergenekon' gang, and emphasized that Turkey's institutions are determined to combat illegal gangs. The PM said the PKK organization was isolated and miserable today, "thanks to the political, military, diplomatic and economic measures taken." He also noted, "The investments we have made in southeast Turkey over the last five and a half years have raised hopes for the future. This change means a loss of ground for the terrorist organization; this is why the PKK wants to create a chaotic atmosphere. They want to change this positive course." Recalling the recent visit of Greek PM Karamanlis to Turkey, Erdogan said the Aegean dispute, Cyprus, and minority problems were the top issues Turkey and Greece are addressing. "We have reiterated our political will to cooperate in resolving our problems and I believe this process will yield positive results for both countries," said Erdogan.

**Protestants in Turkey Complain of Rising Attacks**  
Mainstream Sabah reports the Union of Protestant Churches has released a report saying in 2007, protestants in Turkey were the target of 19 attacks. The murder of three protestants in Malatya plays a prominent role in the report. The report also complains that protestants in Turkey are under surveillance for their missionary activities.

**Editorial Commentary on Revitalization of Turkey-US Ties**  
Hasan Mesut Hazar observed from Washington in conservative-nationalist Turkiye (2/1): "Turkey's new lively foreign policy has thawed relations with Washington. Revitalized relations began with PM Erdogan's visit to the US on November 5, 2007. Erdogan's meeting with Bush, and the bilateral cooperation that resulted against the PKK, marked a turning point in bilateral relations. This impacted Turkish public opinion immediately and positively. The Deputy Chief of General Staff, General Ergin Saygun, is having meetings in the US regarding defense issues and counterterrorism. General Saygun's impressions about the bilateral relationship are also very positive. The US media has also noted this recently revitalized relationship; news and commentaries about Turkey have increased noticeably in the US media. In addition,

there is a delegation from Turkish Parliament visiting the US at the moment. Some members of this delegation delivered remarks at a panel sponsored by the Brookings Institute entitled 'Turkish-American Relations, From the Past to the Future.' All of these visits clearly show the lively improvement in this strategic bilateral relationship. Moreover, US Ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson talked to Turkish journalists in Washington yesterday and stressed that the US believes this spring-like weather will continue."

Editorial Commentary on a Possible Talabani Visit to Turkey  
Cengiz Candar wrote in the economic daily Referans (2/1): "Iraqi Kurdish sources close to Jalal Talabani say the Iraqi President may visit Turkey around February 20. The issue of inviting Talabani to Turkey was raised in the last National Security Council (MGK) meeting, with the military and civilian wings of the Council agreeing to the invitation. Back in 2004, Turkish Foreign Ministry (MFA) Spokesman Namik Tan traveled to Suleymaniye to meet Talabani in a visit interpreted as a 'gesture,' indicating Turkey had no objections to Talabani being the President of Iraq. However, the 'anti-Kurd reflexes' within the Turkish state system began after Talabani settled in Baghdad as President, and they blocked him from visiting Turkey. Iraq's two Shiite prime ministers, Ibrahim Jafari and Nuri al-Maliki, have both visited Turkey several times, but Talabani has not been able to do the same. If Talabani visits Ankara, the sides are expected to discuss a new era in relations concerning northern Iraq. In addition, a new 'institutional aspect' is expected in the relationship between Ankara and Erbil. In that sense, a visit by Talabani is also expected to pave the way for the reestablishment of ties with Barzani. President Talabani would be welcomed at Cankaya with full military honors and his visit would

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melt the ice between Iraq and Turkey."

TV News:

NTV

#### Domestic News

- A military court in the eastern city of Van has launched a case against the eight Turkish soldiers who were held by the PKK in October for allegedly surrendering to the PKK during the attack in Daglica. On October 21, terrorists killed 12 soldiers and wounded 16 others in the Daglica attack, and eight soldiers went missing after clashes on October 22. The soldiers were later brought to Turkey on November 4.

- On Thursday, security forces captured a PKK militant at Habur Gate who was attempting to cross into Turkey at the Iraqi border. Sources said he was sent to Turkey to stage attacks.

- The Council of State (Danistay) has rejected a lawsuit filed by a parent whose daughter was not allowed to participate in university entrance exams because she wore a headscarf.

#### International News

- The Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) announced it would support Democratic candidate Barack Obama in US presidential elections.

- A senior al-Qaeda leader in Afghanistan, Abu Laith al-Libi, reportedly died during a missile attack in northern Pakistan.

- The Swedish Aviation Institution has decided to allow regular civilian flights from Sweden to northern Iraq.

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